

You're having one of those days where you wonder if you should be doing what you're doing. Maybe you should do something more altruistic with your life. You think about what that woman Angela does. Everybody loves people like Angela.

Your career -- you don't think of it as a career -- your ongoing job, is fine. Every job has its upsides and its downsides. You know that if you picked a job at random to do, it would be worse than this job. Any job would be worse at first, but once you got used to it, just about any other job would be worse than this one is now, even though you're tired of it. But you can imagine that working with young people, to teach them how to write, would be better.

You decide to see how your dilemma fares when put out in the open, in the light of conversation, so you text Brian and Julia and discover that they're both at

MITZI'S CAFE, 1731 WASHINGTON AVE.,
HOHERES WESEN, CA, USA

You head over.

Mitzi's is organic tonight, round and quiet, but not in a subtle way. You order your drink and then find where Brian and Julia are sitting.

BRIAN: Hey Beth, you said you had something to talk about.

YOU: Yeah.

JULIA: What is it?

YOU: Remember that woman Angela I told you guys about?

JULIA: Yeah.

YOU: I'm trying to decide whether I should go work for her. But it's not just about that.

JULIA: If it was you would have already done it, or forgotten about it.

YOU: Yeah. I don't know what this is really about.

BRIAN: Before you came, there was this guy talking to us.

JULIA: It was weird.

YOU: I missed it.

BRIAN: Yeah. But what he was talking about was related to what you're talking about. He was talking about how his life philosophy was to do what was convenient.

YOU: Should I just do what's convenient?

BRIAN: No one would fault you for it. Doing what's inconvenient is the exception. That's what he would say, at least.

YOU: Huh. Kind of like that saying "Just like you don't believe in every god except one, I don't believe in one more god, your god."

BRIAN: Yeah. I hadn't made the connection.

YOU: So you're telling me I should just go for it, if I feel like it? For no good reason?

BRIAN: Yeah, if you're being really consistent, you'll realize that there's no good reason to do anything altruistic given the many selfish things you do.

YOU: So what was this guy's story? Did he say?

BRIAN: Yeah, he said that when he was young, he was really into doing the best thing possible. He was really principled. He wanted everything to be logically consistent. At first he tried donating to different charities that people recommended to him, and he volunteered. Then he discovered the effective altruism movement, and realized that it made more sense to donate to effective charities. He stopped volunteering because he got more busy at his job, making money to give away. And he stopped giving money to all the charities except the most effective. He found that giving money was psychologically simple, something he could do as his mind got more and more worn down by maturity and working at his job. He could just make a payment once a year, or set up a monthly automatic payment. And then all he had to do was earn money.

YOU: But then he stopped being that way.

BRIAN: Yeah. He didn't really understand what was happening at the time, but basically, he says he was understanding what reality is all about. The realization happened to come after he got married and had kids, but he said that he wouldn't necessarily assume it was because of that. He said

he realized that reality doesn't work by people obeying their principles. They just do what human beings do. Everybody gives them a pass because we're all human beings.

YOU: You mean, we're all people who fit in to our society? Human nature can change depending on the culture.

BRIAN: Exactly. He felt like it was, not immoral, but too much effort to go against culture. You just end up making people feel bad and nothing good really does happen.

YOU: Because we all genuinely want good things to happen, it's just really hard.

BRIAN: Right. We're not bad people. If we thought we were bad, we'd just feel bad and still not do anything good. So there's no point in making people feel bad by telling them they're bad people.

YOU: But sometimes people do tell each other that they're bad.

BRIAN: He brought that up. He was saying that one thing that got him into effective altruism was the Drowning Child Illustration, the one where you realize that it's more virtuous to let a child drown in front of you if by doing so you can save the lives of ten children that you can't see. And while you don't see a drowning child in front of you every day, the ten kids really do exist, and there's something you can do about their situation. And when he heard that, it hit him hard. It made him do inconvenient things for years. But then he thought about it, and he realized that the logic of the Drowning Child Illustration implied that almost everyone in America is okay with

people starving to death, or dying of malaria. Basically that we're all murderers. But nobody in the effective altruist movement took it that way. He certainly didn't. There was something about it that was an absolute, that spoke to him, but then convenience set in.

YOU: But we couldn't possibly believe that we're murderers, that would be psychologically unsustainable.

BRIAN: Right, so everyone in the movement who was inspired by that Illustration were inspired by something they never would have let inspire them if they understood it. And it was effective in motivating them to change their lives. But in his case, he just returned to the mainstream after a few years. He says he likes to travel with his family, see new places. "Life is made for enjoyment", he says.

YOU: Did he say that sadly?

BRIAN: No, but not happily either.

YOU: So is he a good person or not?

BRIAN: I don't know.

JULIA: Maybe it would have worked if the effective altruists had said, "Hey, we're all giving money to these charities, it's fun and cool, you should do it, too, this is what fun and cool people like us do." After they had made friends with each other.

BRIAN: Yeah, maybe that would work. But what they actually choose to do is to say "You need to take responsibility for the world. Look at reality

for yourself. See the ugly truth? See your path for redemption? It's up to you to do what's real."

JULIA: It seems like being into reality just makes people suffer.

BRIAN: So, Beth, Julia and I were debating this before you came. Is reality worth it? Being a real person? Seeing things for yourself? Or is it better to not suffer?

YOU: Did you take the side of reality and Julia took the side of not suffering?

BRIAN: No, we found ourselves going back and forth. It was a weird debate. We took each other's positions, but we continued to disagree.

YOU: More debates should be like that.

JULIA: It's good that we never agreed with each other.

YOU: Agreeing is good, though, right?

JULIA: It's bad to agree too soon.

YOU: You're friends, still, right?

JULIA: No, we're enemies now. But that's better than being friends. The chart goes like this:

She draws on a napkin.

JULIA: "Really... bad... enemies... fake.... friends.... friends.... enemies...." Yeah.

There's a progression from left to right.

JULIA: Really bad enemies are the worst. Then fake friends are the next worse. Then friends are better. But enemies are the best.

YOU: Why is that?

JULIA: Enemies tell you the truth. Really bad enemies scam you, fake friends con you, friends are too polite, but enemies tell you the truth.

YOU: But are all enemies like that?

JULIA: Sometimes fake friends pretend to be enemies so that they can be better than friends, and they use some enemy lines. But they aren't really enemies because they're still pretending to be friends.

YOU: So you and Brian have progressed to the next level?

JULIA: Yeah.

Brian nods.

YOU: Wow, I'm not sure I could ever be anyone's enemy.

BRIAN: I didn't either until just now. I can probably only be enemies with certain people.

YOU: Maybe when I find the right person, I can be enemies with them. Would that make me a real person?

JULIA: The first rule of becoming a real person is that trying to become real makes you fake.

BRIAN: Fakest thing ever.

YOU: Are you two agreeing on that?

BRIAN: Yes.

YOU: So you're friends again?

BRIAN: Right now I believe that trying to become real is fake because it's all about you, while there are suffering people out there you could be helping. If you just help those people, then you're not focused on yourself, and you are real. You can only be real when you're not thinking about whether you're real.

JULIA: And right now I believe that trying to become real is fake because when we want something to be real, what we really want is meaning, something from the Universe to speak to us most deeply within our beings. And you can never put words in someone else's mouth, and still have it be a communication of who or what they really are.

YOU: With all this talk of meaning and reality, aren't we forgetting about suffering? What kind of people are we, if we reach for anything other than the basics of what helps people not to suffer?

JULIA: People who care about reality really do something about suffering. People who stop caring about reality gradually do less and less. Brian was explaining about hell to me. I'm not convinced there really is a hell, but he made hell sound like it wasn't totally evil. Brian?

She mimes that she's speaking into and then passing him a microphone. He accepts.

BRIAN: Thanks, Julia. Yes, well, there was this one study about hell, where they found that people who believed in hell engaged in less antisocial behavior. And people who believed in heaven engaged in more antisocial behavior. It's just one study, so I'm taking it with a grain of salt for now. But it makes sense to me when I think about it. If you believe in divine punishment -- whether it's hell or something else -- you have to do the right thing whether or not other people are looking. So then you start to internalize "don't cheat" as an absolute. "Don't cheat" becomes a little god that rules over you. And eventually you start to love "Don't cheat" because you come to understand how it's good for everyone. You love not cheating in itself, and it's a principle for you that you obey, even when people aren't watching, but not as a little god of pure morality, but a god of love for other people through the absolute divinity of that god. And not divinity in a warm, fuzzy way, but divinity in the sense that you have to fear and respect that thing. And I guess God takes up that little god of love into himself, so that through the little god we connect to the real person of God, who uses the doctrine of hell for our benefit. So that is why a loving God would threaten punishment, so that we would become real.

YOU: Couldn't God just tell us that we need to love and then we would know to do it?

BRIAN: You have to teach people who don't love people genuinely to love people somehow. You can't put the conclusion to your argument in one of the premises.

YOU: But come on, it's easy, just love people. Don't make it all complicated.

BRIAN: In that case, you're saying "people will disapprove of you if you don't abide by their norm".

YOU: Right. So then you internalize "an asshole looks like this; don't be an asshole" and then you hate yourself when you're an asshole and people call you an asshole and that makes you a good person, and then you aren't an asshole. You genuinely want to fit in with the people around you, they are your god, and that makes you into a good person. Being a good person is defined by pleasing the community as a whole. The community knows what kind of behaviors need to be stigmatized.

BRIAN: Does the community stigmatize us for not doing anything about the millions of people living in poverty?

YOU: No.

JULIA: Not even in the effective altruism community.

BRIAN: Does the community care about God's interests? Does it care about the environment? Is it motivating us to do anything real to prepare for the Calamity?

YOU: No. Not really.

BRIAN: So if you rely on this god as your god, you'll be stuck with the priorities of your community, rather than being connected with reality itself. Maybe the community will see reality, because people outside the community will teach it what to care about, from reality itself.

YOU: But the community absolutely hates and fights those people at first.

BRIAN: Yeah.

YOU: I guess if you want to cheat in a socially acceptable way, that's fine socially, but it could have bad effects in the long run if everyone did it.

BRIAN: Yeah, you would have a gradual lowering of standards in society.

YOU: And the dark side of the belief in hell, all the guilt and shame of it, the way it gets people to cut off part of themselves, would still be there if the community was the punishing god. So the community isn't that much better.

BRIAN: But it's more popular.

YOU: Right now, it is.

JULIA: When people make each other's social approval into a god, then they have to be polite, and they start to become fake friends, and they never get to become enemies like me and Brian.

YOU: Yeah. The worst betrayals come from fake friends.

JULIA: Have you ever heard of Brian's Hierarchy of Betrayal?

YOU: Is this an official thing?

BRIAN: No, it's not. Have you ever heard of Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs?

YOU: That's the one where there's a pyramid, and

the bottom layers are about satisfying needs for food and sex and temperature regulation and stuff like that, and then the next layer up is social needs, and at the very pinnacle of the pyramid is self-actualization, whatever that is.

BRIAN: Okay, yeah. So some people threaten you at the lower levels of Maslow's Hierarchy, and then they don't become your friends at all. If you think of that threatening man you see on the street and steer clear of, he might stab you on a bad day, and you have to go to the hospital. But he's never going to betray you on the level of social stuff. For that you need a friend. You trust a friend, a nice person of your social class, you let them in to the higher places on the hierarchy, and then they can betray you there. They can ostracize you, or slander you. But then, if you really trust someone, if there's someone that's really good at being your friend, or almost is a really good match, then they can betray you at the layer of self-actualization or even higher. Really advanced fake friends can actually make you betray what's really good, when you deeply and sincerely believed it. I bet it was one of them, or something like them, that got the effective altruism guy to the point where he would say "Life is about enjoyment" in the context of him going on vacation instead of helping people with malaria or poverty.

YOU: Maybe it was his wife.

BRIAN: It could have been. He didn't say enough for us to know. Maybe it was all of his friends who didn't even intend that, it's just out there in the culture, a spirit.

YOU: A spirit of friendship.

BRIAN: No one's feelings get hurt.

JULIA: But it really *hurts* when people's feelings get hurt. It matters.

BRIAN: Yeah, it's fake to not consider the reality of people's emotions.

JULIA: Sometimes you have to hurt people, but you *know* what it's like to be them, but you have to do it anyway.

BRIAN: Sometimes I wish I was as empathetic as you, Julia.

JULIA: You're funny, Brian.

YOU: I think someone could be fake by saying "I *know* what it's like to be you" and do something painful but not really care.

JULIA: Yeah.

YOU: So how can we deal with this?

BRIAN: I think some people are always going to be fake.

YOU: What if they believed in divine punishment?

BRIAN: That would help with some people.

YOU: But the mainstream doesn't believe in a punishing God.

BRIAN: You're right, neither the secular nor the religious people believe in divine punishment.

YOU: When I was growing up, my friends who

went to church would tell me about hell. Like it was a big thing.

BRIAN: Yeah, things have changed. I guess I have run into some Christians who still believe in hell.

YOU: Isn't the belief in hell a really abusive thing?

BRIAN: It can be.

YOU: So nothing is perfect.

BRIAN: No, but things can be better.

YOU: I think if you find a reality that deep down you consider perfect, that's fake. Like if you say that things are good enough, throw up your hands, that's fake.

BRIAN: Yeah, and if you think your method of seeking to make things better is the best, that's fake.

YOU: So you have to have a kind of dissatisfaction all the time.

BRIAN: But it's fake to say "I should just make sure I have to have dissatisfaction feelings".

YOU: Right. You have to really be dissatisfied. You have to really cry out and never get what you want. That's how you can be real. But there's a version of that that crushes people emotionally.

BRIAN: Right, you have to get over the fake dissatisfaction in that area. If the dissatisfaction kills you, it's fake.

JULIA: You two are agreeing a lot. Are you

friends?

BRIAN: Maybe it's possible for there to be real friends. Real friends are just as good as enemies, because real friends are based in dissatisfaction just as much as enemies are. Really bad enemies are like fake friends.

YOU: How do you know if someone is a fake friend trying to be an enemy to make themselves look like a friend, versus an enemy?

JULIA: You know. Your body knows.

BRIAN: There's a clarity of thought to a confrontation with an enemy. But there's confusion when there's a fake friend faking like an enemy. Enemies are into clarity, fake friends acting like enemies are into confusion.

YOU: You both know something about this. Maybe that's why you're enemies.

BRIAN: It might be why we find enmity trustworthy.

You feel hungry, and realize you've been here a while, and realize that you came here over a duration of time, which had a beginning, and a reason to begin. What about your question of whether to help the young people at Angela's non-profit?

YOU: So what should I do about helping Angela?

BRIAN: Do you really want to help? Or are you on the fence?

YOU: I guess I'm on the fence.

BRIAN: Then do you really want to help?

YOU: No.

BRIAN: Okay, then don't do it.

YOU: But... I do feel like helping.

BRIAN: If that feeling really does cause you to help, then it was real. If it doesn't, then it was fake.

YOU: That's what being on the fence is all about. Brian, what do you do to help people?

BRIAN: Nothing. Except work on my philosophy and share my ideas with people.

YOU: What do you do, Julia?

JULIA: I just try to survive.

YOU: So you don't help people?

JULIA: I have to show up to whatever job I have to do so that whoever has my life when I'm not there doesn't get fired. That helps them but I have to do it.

YOU: I guess that does help people.

JULIA: If you want to help people, do it.

YOU: I think about it, but it's hard to commit.

JULIA: Okay, then don't do it. Someday it will speak to you.

YOU: When?

JULIA: Maybe you have to open your heart.

YOU: I'm trying to. I just don't have any clarity in this situation.

JULIA: Okay, maybe you really are trying. Maybe the trying will lead to you acting.

YOU: Maybe there's something else I'm supposed to be doing. But... this doesn't make any sense. I'm talking like there's some God or Universe with a plan for my life.

BRIAN: You could earn the most money you can, and spend as little as you can on yourself, and donate the difference to the most empirically-recommended charity.

YOU: No, that's not right, that doesn't speak to me.

BRIAN: Why does it have to speak to you? What are you waiting for? Are you waiting for God?

YOU: Yes, I think I am, in a way.

BRIAN: Well, is there a God?

YOU: I don't think we have any proof.

BRIAN: But you're waiting for him.

YOU: Yes.

You think, then speak again.

YOU: Maybe it doesn't have to speak to me. I can just do what doesn't speak to me. But then, what do we live for if not for the things that speak to

us? What do we know if not what we see ourselves, with our own eyes?

BRIAN: Adulthood is about paradox, about how what doesn't feel like it would be good for you actually is good for you overall.

YOU: I know. I learned that lesson when I became an adult. You're just learning it.

BRIAN: Yeah, that's why it's fresh in my mind.

YOU: But it's fake.

BRIAN: How so? Doesn't it lead us to do what's most effective?

You feel ardent and they let you speak.

YOU: It leads to fakeness. Because when we discount what we see, we rely on the community's point of view as well as on some kind of artificial best practice. The community and the best practices can be better than our own point of view, but if we rely on them for long enough, we lose touch with reality. Our culture is far too adult, has gotten out of touch with reality, valorizes being out of touch with reality, valorizes not looking at what you really think as being true. We don't believe in "The One" anymore and so we don't really believe in marriage, in being in love. Instead, anyone will do. We don't believe in God, or in morals, only in the socially-constructed God, in community as a God, in social disapprobation. Our maturity is fake, is all about losing touch with reality in the midst of good technique. Brian, you and I are equals.

BRIAN: We are?

YOU: We are.

JULIA: Maybe you need to find a younger person to talk to about these kinds of things, Beth. Brian is just one person.

YOU: Yeah.

JULIA: If you find that person, maybe just to be their friend is the thing you're supposed to do, instead of being a writing teacher.

YOU: Yeah, maybe.

You feel emotionally exhausted -- you can be easily emotionally exhausted. Sometimes you catch yourself before you make speeches, but sometimes you don't. You don't want to be part of this conversation anymore but can't think of a graceful exit and the three of you find yourselves not talking for part of a minute.

YOU: I don't know.

BRIAN: The conversation isn't over.

YOU: Yeah. That's a good way to look at it.

You get up to go.

YOU: I think I should go now.

BRIAN: Don't be happy.

YOU: Same to you.

You go outside and walk around and

think about everything. You think about how all we know is experience and we all experience how life has meaning. You think about things. You think about Angela. You barely think of her as human, as she was on the day you met. Angela, the source of the opportunity. You walk past a homeless man sleeping on the sidewalk. You pass a bar, which smells like a dive bar. You keep going until you get home.

[closing theme]

WAITING FOR MARGOT
Episode 16 "Inner Conflict"
Written 25 April 2019
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COMMENTS

1. Effective altruism is a movement in our world as well. For many people it is somewhat as described above. But there is more than meets the eye...

2.

YOU: And the dark side of the belief in hell, all the guilt and shame of it, the way it gets people to cut off part of themselves, would still be there if the community was the punishing god. So the community isn't that much better.

Is it really true that "all" the guilt and shame and self-mutilation of hell is present when we make society the punishing god instead of the idea of hell or the God who ordains hell? Arguably, a social god is even more pernicious when it uses the idea of the God of hell, than if it relies on the "softer" methods of ostracization and shaming.

For some reason, in our society, we live as though reason is real. As though facts really do apply to everything -- including moral facts, which we can't really ground in objectivity, which are instead grounded in human judgment instead. Why are we in the habit of applying moral facts evenly? Well, we're not, hence our ability to give ourselves a pass for not caring about starving people, or future people, or God. But to the extent that we are, where does this come from? From self-interest? Maybe. We realize that being altruistic is in the long-term self-interest of the human species. But why not be the one person who

defects, in a crowd of people who cooperate, and take advantage of all of them? Why care about the long-term interests of the human race?

It could be that belief in hell makes us believe that the moral world is a world of fact, that it's a law that always applies. The deepest self-interest is pierced through by the thought of excruciating suffering that never ends. So then the self-interested have to care about the hell-wielder's laws, until they get enough time to come to love the laws themselves and then the law-giver, and to love law for its legitimacy rather than for its force.

In a world where we still have law internalized in us, we come to think that the idea of hell, which taught us to care about what we personally did not care about, as fact and inescapable reality, by the very pathway of our own self-interest, is abhorrent. But could we have arrived where we are without the idea of hell, or of a punishing God, who watches us all the time and deserves to discipline us?

If we believe in a morality grounded in something outside human judgment, it is likely that it will be inhumane, because it will go against our judgments as the human consensus. If we believe in morality as being merely our consensus, then we are condemned to whatever our consensus happens to be. Whoever it excludes, will be excluded. What we tend to do is feel morality as law, as reality, but really we're just executing the social god's, the consensus's, desires.

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